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ABSTRACT

By the year 2000, at least 20 percent of Europeans will be over 60 years old. As the labor force ages, older employees will have to contribute more to the productivity of organizations. Due to rapid technological changes, more retraining will be required. Education can fulfill important functions for older adults, but their learning style must be taken into consideration. To get insight into participation in and the need for education, recent data comparing 100 people over age 50 to 299 people under 50 in the district of Middle Limburg in the Netherlands were analyzed. Thirty-five percent of those over 50 have pursued educational activity in the previous 5 years compared with 50 percent of those under 50. Motives to participate are personal growth and better understanding of societal developments. Reasons for nonparticipation are lack of time and being too old. A strong relationship between participation and former education exists. Older adults with more education more often enter courses. The variety of provisions for education for older adults is reflected in a fragmented financing system, ad hoc structure, and incompatible cultures. A policy for education for the elderly needs to be developed that anticipates adequately the challenge for lifelong learning. (14 references) (YLB)

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AGING AND ADULT EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR ADULT EDUCATORS

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Paper to be presented on the AAACE-Conference 1990

Salt Lake City

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"The intellectual power of the elderly remains unaffected, the wish and the zeal to acquire knowledge ,however, must also remain unaffected" (M.Tullius Cicero, 160-43 BC : Cato Maior de Senectute).

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Introduction

In all European countries the number of people of sixty years and older will increase sharply. Seventeen per cent of the 490 millions of inhabitants in Europe is over sixty years old, in the year 2000 this percentage will be twenty per cent (EURAG, 1988). In the United States, in 1984, more than twenty per cent of the population was older than sixtyfive. This percentage will also raise until 2000 (AAARP, 1986)

The consequences of this process of aging for education have been rather neglected until recently. In this paper first the changing social and economic roles of the elderly and their educational needs and wants will be discussed. It is expected that older adults will increasingly participate in education. This raises the question how older adults learn and what the implications are for instructional programs. Next we will present the results of a recent, nation wide researchproject on education for the elderly in the Netherlands, which was carried out under the authority of the Dutch Foundation for Educational Research (Cramer & Van der Kamp,1990). This paper will be concluded with some comments on the perspectives of education for older adults and the necessity of anticipation by adult educators.

Demographic developments and the consequences for education

Chronological age is not a very accurate measure of oldness. Becoming old also has a psychological and social character. In this paper the term 'older adults' refers to persons over 55 and to those who are experiencing difficulties caused by age-related factors (Peterson,1987). So, the social context also determines how old someone feels, in labour organizations people even over fifty are called 'older employees'.

In general life circumstances of the elderly are not always easy (EURAG,1988). On the one hand there is a growing number of older people who are well educated, have a good income and have leisure time. In the world of advertizing those are called 'GRAMPIES', i.e. Growing Retired Active Monied Persons in an Excellent State'. On the other hand there are older people who have little more than primary school, e.g. in the Netherlands 50 per cent of people over sixtyfive. Many older people have a low income. Specially older widows are often isolated and confronted with problems in the fields of culture, health and care. For the latter the ability to participate in a complex, democratic society has great preventive significance. This demands knowledge and skills.

In Europe and the United States the process of aging goes hand in hand with a decreasing number of younger people. This has consequences for the labour force. With the exception of Ireland the number of younger employees will gradually drop in all EC-countries. For example, the part of the 25-years and younger of the French and British labour force will decline by about 2 per cent a year (Institute of Manpower Studies). In the United States, by the year 2010 the group of workers 55 years and older is expected to reach 21.7 million - approximately 15.4 per cent of the entire working population. At the same time the youth workforce, comprised of entry-level workers aged 16 to 24 is projected to rapidly decline (Deets, 1990).

Because of this process of aging of the labour force, older employees will have to contribute more to the productivity of organizations. For the last years, however, in large numbers they have been expelled from the labour market. This is not only a personal problem for these employees themselves, but they have also become an extensive public charge.

Due to the fast (technological) changes in West-European and American labour organizations and the wear of knowledge of the lower educated older employees in particular, more retraining will be required to keep productivity on the same level. This also applies to Eastern Europe where the re-orientation on a free market economy calls for training and education. Such a change will be difficult especially for older employees.

How do older adults learn ?

Considering the position of older adults in society, education can fulfil important functions. But are the elderly still able to learn ? 'One can't learn an old dog new tricks' as the saying goes. Sometimes becoming old is stereotyped with forgetfulness and decay. Gerontology has given insight into the learning needs from the perspective of development, intelligence, information-processing and interferences. When it comes to sensory perceptions, fitness and ability to react, physical changes occur which ask for some adaptions of the learning environment.

Research shows that intelligence does not appreciably decrease as people become older, which was initially assumed. The ability to learn abstract concepts ('fluid intelligence') is indeed subject to obsolescence, particularly if swiftness is needed, but verbal abilities and learning by experience ('crystallized intelligence') give adequate compensation (Peterson,1987).

Especially for older employees the 'experience concentration theory' could be of importance (Thijssen,1988). This theory can be summarized in two premisses:
- the quantity of experiences is growing;
- the variety of experiences is decreasing.

It is assumed that adults with a concentration of the same experiences have a smaller domain in which they feel better at home. The discrepancy with subjects not belonging to this concentration domain, becomes larger. The willingness and capacity to change depends more or less on the scale of this concentration domain.
Thijssen distinguishes three levels, each of which in a way are related to someone's work situation and the learning of new professional skills. These levels are:
(a) professional skills;
(b) learning strategy;
(c) social and cultural context.

The professional skills refer to someone's work experience. Many employees who have carried out the same tasks for a long time show job fixation. When great changes of tasks occur, someone might be inflexible. Learning strategy means the experience and capacity to solve problems. An executive, for example, will be confronted continually with new problems and challenges to learn, someone who works on the assembly line will be more vulnerable when retraining is necessary.

The social and cultural context is important, because it can encourage the motivation to learn. According to Cross (1983) there are different barriers for people to participate in adult education: situational, institutional and dispositional. The latter concern psychological characteristics such as fear to learn and the feeling that one is too old to learn. A positive attitude towards learning of people in the social context can help to overcome this kind of barriers.
These three levels together determine someone's domain of concentration. If someone has to learn more knowledge and skills outside this domain, then more adaptions of the instructional programmes are needed. Such adaptions are:

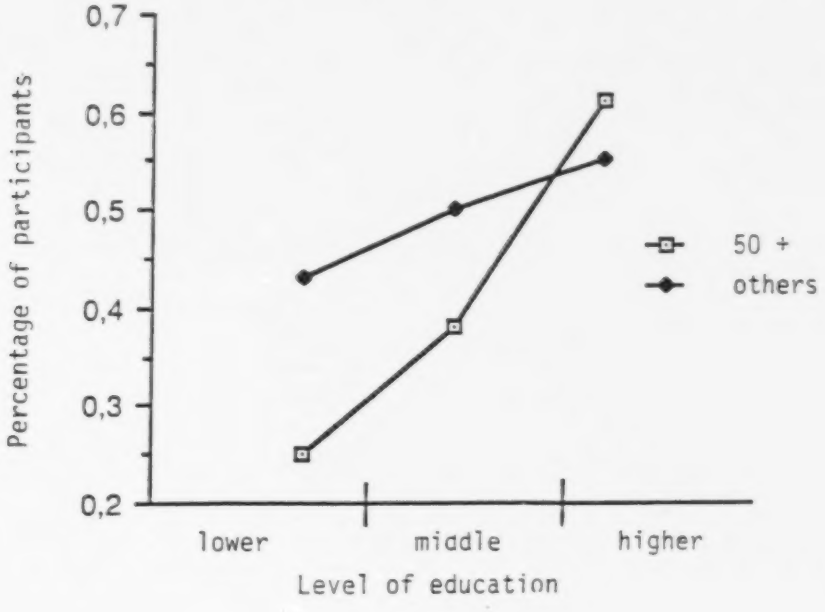
(a) active processing of new information;
(b) systematic feedback;
(c) use of recognizable concepts;
(d) direct application of what has been learned;
(e) facilitating the social context by a friendly sphere;
(f) facilitating the logistic context.

Thijssens theory still lacks a sound empirical basis, but at the moment we are carrying out a researchproject on older lower employees of a big company in the Netherlands (Philips). It is also important to compare this theory thoroughly with recent research on 'practical intelligence' (Sternberg & Wagner, 1986).

Education for older adults in the Netherlands

To get insight into the participation in and the needs of education repent data of the adult population of the district of Middle Limburg , in the south of the Netherlands, were analysed. In this way a comparison between people over 50 (n=100) and others (n=299) could be made. 35 Per cent of people over 50 had followed some educational activity during the previous five years, compare to 50 per cent of others. The main motives of the older adults to participate were: 'personal growth' and 'better understanding of developments in society'. Apart from 'lack of time', reasons for non participation were 'I'm too old to learn' (25 per cent) and 'I have never felt the need' (20 per cent). A strong relationship between participation and former education was found (see fig. 1). Older adults with more education more often entered courses.

fig. 1. The relation between level of education and participation in adult education for a group of elderly people (100) and other categories (299).

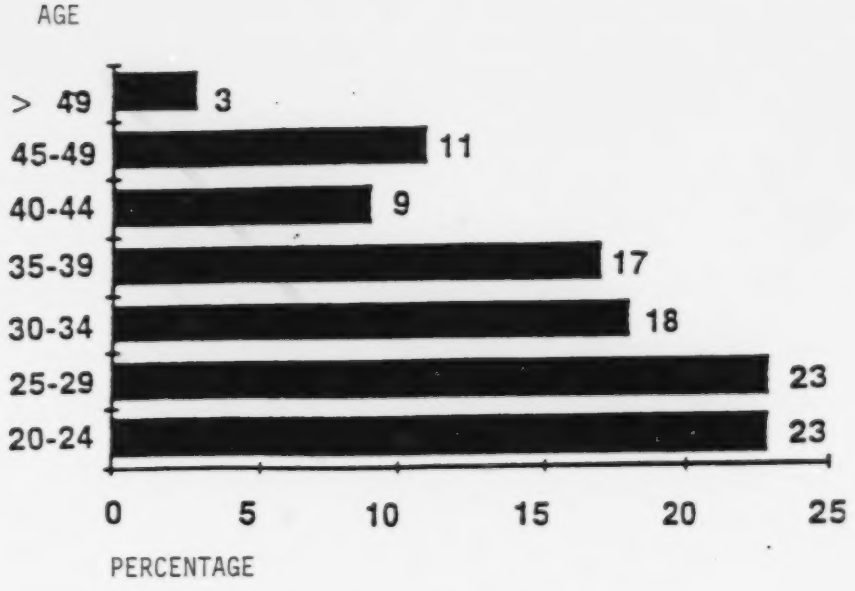


Because the level of education of older people will increase considerably, the expectation is justified that more older adults will participate in education in the years to come. How many older participants there are in the Netherlands at the moment is hard to say, because this has not been registered.

By a survey of educational organizations for (older) adults we have estimated the number of participants 150.000 to 200.000 a year (5 per cent of the population over 50). Other research mentions a figure of about 10 per cent, due to a broader definition of education (SCP,1990). The participation grade of the Dutch population in general is about 20 per cent.

What about the educational provisions for the elderly in the Netherlands ? Education for the elderly appears to be a relatively young institution. In our research we have tried to paint a quantitative and qualitative picture of the variety of provisions. These provisions are: pre-retirement programs, educational activities of the elderly organizations, study circles, memory training, health education, adult education centres, basic education for adults, evening classes, correspondence education and higher education for the elderly ('senior university'). Relatively few older adults take part in vocational training and in-service training of industrial organizations (see fig.2).

fig. 2. Participation in inservice-training according to age and percentages of the number of employees.



Most interest of the elderly is in creative and language courses, but also in cultural themes and existential issues.

The variety of provisions is reflected in a fragmented financing system, an ad-hoc structure and incompatible cultures, originating on the one hand from the world of education and on the other hand from elderly care.
Because of the lack of coherence and transparency it is difficult for older people to find the courses they wish to follow.

Perspectives

The situation in the Netherlands seems to be comparible to those in other European countries and the United States. This was apparent at the twelfth international congress of the 'European Federation for the well-being of the elderly' (EURAG) in the Hague. It was acknowledged that the supply of educational activities for the elderly had been growing during the last decade, but that the participation in Europe had left much to be desired. Schneider, for instance, mentioned some figures: 80 per cent of the people between 50 and 65 years old in Braunschweig had never attended a course at an adult education centre (EURAG,1988). In the USA and in Great Britain the participation rates of the elderly have increased rapidly (in 1978 respectively 2,4 and 2 per cent), at this moment these are about 5 per cent (Withnall & Kabwasa, 1989). Approximately the same figures are found in West-Germany (Marggraf et al,1986). A survey on elderly people carried out by the American NCES revealed a striking resemblance with our results concerning reasons for non participation. The reason 'too old to learn' scored 27 per cent of the interviewed older people.
From research on participation of elderly involved in learning activities in the United Kingdom it has appeared that, on being questioned about their reasons (or rationalizations) for not participating currently in adult education classes, 37 per cent of non participants aged 55 years and over said that they were 'too old now' (Percy,1989). International focus is on pre-retirement courses and the so-called 'troisième age' arrangements of the universities. In nearly all European countries and the United States the fact that the low educated older people do not participate is felt as problematic (Withnall et al,1983).

Up to now policy in the field of education for the elderly is lacking. Adult education policy has neglected the elderly. Elderly policy has given priority to the care of the elderly and to the expenses in connection with aging. It has not been acknowledged yet that education could be an important instrument of elderly policy: preventive and saving in costs.

The economic significance of education for the older employees has already been mentioned. At this moment this has not been recognized yet by industrial organizations.

They do not stimulate their older employees to participate in in-service training, on the other hand the willingness of the older employee to enter is not very high.

And yet in the light of technological, social-cultural and demographic developments in Europe and the United States more and more older adults are expected to follow educational activities. A redoubling of demand seems by no means an exaggeration. To anticipate adequately on this challenge an educational policy orientated on the full life span is necessary. A real process of permanent learning requires educational facilities also for older learners.

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